

and reinforced many extant collaborative undertakings of cultural institutions. By their very nature, digital projects not only benefit from collaboration through the sharing of resources and expertise but also lend themselves easily to collaborative undertakings. Digitization reduces the distance between repositories to a keystroke, eliminates barriers erected between different types of research materials, reunites separated collections.

Online collaboration offers great promise for the users of cultural materials. Through this collaboration, museum and library collections can be consulted simultaneously. For example, items at the Outer Banks History Center and the Mountain Heritage Center, with an entire breadth of the state physically separating them, share the promise of easily being consulted from one place, the researcher's home. The Internet can link collections never before brought together and virtually reunites holdings that may have been separated, all to the user's benefit.

Equally important, perhaps, is the potential interaction of the state's many excellent small, often volunteer-run collections with the state's major repositories. As a whole, the smaller institutions constitute the largest holders of cultural information in the state of North Carolina. Current surveying results estimate that there are over 900 individual repositories across North Carolina's 100 counties. Many of these small to mid-sized institutions have collections that are at risk for a variety of reasons, particularly preservation and conservation concerns. In addition, many collections have limited or no public access, making them essentially hidden to the public at large. Digitization can dramatically change the visibility and accessibility of these collections. It holds the promise of greatly expanding the state's collective cultural knowledge.

These smaller institutions hold the history of local and regional North Carolina, and it is often within the local and regional collections that schools look to build educational units for their curriculum and to stimulate young students to study history, anthropology, science, literature, and a myriad other subjects. They do it by first looking, quite literally, in their own back yards. Many schools across the state search for sources for local history and find the process frustrating. Digitization initiatives offer solutions to these problems.

The larger institutions within the state, many of which are nationally and internationally recognized, often have greater technological, fiscal and staffing resources. Many have begun digitization or are well into the process. When smaller institutions begin to plan for digitizing their collections, they may want to collaborate with their colleagues at the larger institutions. Larger institutions may, in turn, wish to reach out to smaller, local institutions in order to expand their intellectual base. Often holdings at one institution can be linked to holdings at another, or institutions can share in the development of a digital project built around a particular concept. Small institutions can learn from the larger institution's practices and successes, while contributing valuable insight on content and organization as well as a reality check for technical experimentation.

Standards and Best Practices

Digitization involves a myriad of standards and best practices that inform digital production and access. While standards and best practices are not new to cultural heritage institutions, the nature of digitization makes adherence an imperative. Making decisions about which standards to follow and which practices are really best can be a daunting and overwhelming task. In addition, digital standards are more fluid than traditional standards. Often, they